

The Origin Story of the Protocols: Okhrana

From the Lecture Series: The Real History of Secret Societies

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A secret society called the Learned Elders of Zion never existed. But the spurious document that invented it—the so-called Protocols—does exist. The story of the Protocols is a story full of lies, deception, and of course, secret societies. So, let's analyze the most common story behind the Protocols: 'Okhrana-did-it'.



A secret society called the Learned Elders of Zion never existed, but the spurious document that invented it—the Protocols—does exist.
(Image: DedMityay/Shutterstock)

The Supposed Origin Story of the Protocols

Picture a semi-dark room in Paris. The year is 1904 or 1905. Two men peer at papers laid out on a small table. One copies from one of the documents to another. The second watches with satisfaction. The writer is Matvei Golovinsky, an employee of the Russian secret police,

or Okhrana. The other is his boss, Peter Rachkovsky, who oversees the Okhrana's foreign operations.

The document Golovinsky copies from is an 1864 political tract titled *The Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*. The document he's creating is the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion or Protocols for short. Rachkovsky will soon put the finished product in the hands of the religious fanatic Sergei Nilus, who'll publish them in his 1905 book *The Great in the Small*. The rest, as they say, is history.

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The Purpose of the Origin Story



Sergei Nilus published the Protocols in a 1905 book called *The Great in the Small*. (Image: Sergei Nilus (1862-1929)/Public domain)

However, the story isn't true. It never happened. It couldn't have happened. The true origins of perhaps the most pernicious document in modern history remain a mystery. The Protocols purport to be the minutes of a Jewish secret society—the so-called Elders of Zion—bent on world domination.

Anti-Semitism, which is to say, anti-Jewism, was nothing new. It had been around for centuries. But the Protocols subtly and critically

changed this prejudice. While Jews had long been persecuted for not being Christians, they generally weren't seen as irredeemable or inhuman. All they had to do was convert.

But the Protocols turned Jews into predatory monsters scheming to enslave the rest of humanity. In this view, Jews weren't a nuisance, but a threat; a threat that could only be removed by their extermination.

*This is a transcript from the video series **The Real History of Secret Societies**. [Watch it now, on The Great Courses Plus.](#)*

The 'Okhrana-Did-It' Version

The 'Okhrana-did-it' version of the Protocols' origins has been popularized by the late Norman Cohn's 1967 book *Warrant for Genocide*.

Cohn was a London-born linguist and expert on Nazi anti-Semitism. In 1999, the Okhrana theory received further support when a Russian researcher named Mikhail Lepekhin discovered documents in Moscow that seemed to confirm Matvei Golovinsky as the forger.

The Supposed Role of Sacred Brotherhood

Golovinsky was also a member of a secret society: The Sacred or Holy Brotherhood, a group that plays a murky but important role in this story.

The Sacred Brotherhood sprang-up after the 1881 assassination of Tsar Alexander II at the hands of revolutionaries. The man credited with dreaming it up was the future imperial finance and prime minister Sergei Witte.

Witte believed that the only way to fight revolutionary terrorism was with counter-terrorism. But the person who turned Witte's dream into a reality was the chief of the tsar's personal guard, Count Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov.

Headed by a secret, five-man 'council of elders', the Sacred Brotherhood enlisted hundreds of noblemen, businessmen, and others anxious to protect the tsar and save Russia.

The Brotherhood included several Jewish members as well. But it was a private, not a state, organization. That earned it the hostility of many tsarist officials. Some were just jealous, while others smelled

something sinister. One minister declared the Brotherhood preached 'sedition of another kind'.

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The Formal End of the Sacred Brotherhood

Official pressure and internal quarrels formally ended the Sacred Brotherhood barely two years after it began. But that didn't mean it was dead. The Russian secret police, the Okhrana, was basically an official replacement for the Sacred Brotherhood, and the Okhrana undoubtedly absorbed parts of it. Under men like Peter Rachkovsky, the Okhrana created a vast clandestine network of spies and informers stretching across Europe.

But in pinning the blame for the Protocols on Rachkovsky, Norman Cohn inadvertently relied on very unreliable sources. The same was true of Russian researcher, Lepekhin, who simply repeated what French intelligence had picked up from many of the same dubious sources. A lie ended-up being explained with more lies.

Learn more about [the Knights Templar](#).

Doubts over Okhrana's Role and Protocols' Date

Doubts about the Okhrana's role in the Protocols arose early on. The Russian scholar Vladimir Burtsev was a revolutionary and staunch critic of the tsarist secret police. Nevertheless, investigation convinced Burtsev that the Okhrana had nothing to do with it. For instance, Burtsev determined that neither Rachkovsky nor Golovinsky were even in Paris at the time.

Rachkovsky had been dismissed from Okhrana service in 1902. So why would he have been concocting the Protocols for that agency two years later?

Moreover, Italian researcher Cesare de Michelis found that the first version of Protocols actually appeared in 1903, not 1905. It appeared in a small St. Petersburg paper called *Znamya*, which was a mouthpiece for violently anti-Semitic groups known as the Black Hundreds.

Common Questions about the Origin Story of the Protocols: Okhrana

Q: Did Okhrana write the Protocols?

We can't be sure about the provenance of the Protocols. But there is plenty of evidence that stands against the assertion that Okhrana wrote the Protocols.

Q: When was the Protocols published?

The Protocols was first published in 1903, and not 1905. But, the more popular version is the 1905 one, published by Sergei Nilus.

Q: Who copied the Protocols of the Elders of the Zion?

There is no credible source that informs about the author of the Protocols of the Elders of the Zion. Nevertheless, it's quite likely that the book was written by Maurice Joly, the author of *The Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*.

Q: Who is the author of *the Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*

Maurice Joly is the author of *The Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu* from which certain parts of the Protocols are plagiarized.